



Myth of the Origin of Smallpox

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MYTH OF THE ORIGIN OF SMALLPOX.

THERE is a temple of the goddess Kāli the Terrible in the rural town of Cranganore ¹ in the Cochin State, South India, where, in the Malayalam month of *Mina* (March-April) devotees from all parts of the country flock with offerings of money and sacrificial cocks for the terrible Mother, and turmeric powder for Vasūri Kanḍāra, otherwise known as Ghaṇṭākarna, in fulfilment of vows made in fear of cholera and smallpox. The goddess herself is supposed only to direct and control the work of a demoness Vasūrimāla, who is the agent through whom she inflicts the scourges on her people. Astrologers believe that, when a person is under the evil influence of the planet Mars, he becomes susceptible to infectious diseases of the skin; Mars and the goddess Kāli are closely associated, thus providing people with an astrological *raison d'être* for the worship of the latter for immunity from smallpox.

The following myth narrates how Kāli, Ghaṇṭākarna, and Vasūrimāla came all to be associated with smallpox :—

There was once a wicked demon named Dāruka, to destroy whom Siva, the three-eyed god, created from his median eye a female warrior known as Bhadra Kāli.² The fight that ensued between Kāli and the demon was indeed terrible and long. Manōdari, the dutiful wife of Dāruka, fearing the worst for her husband in the contest, hastened to the Himalayas, where she practised the severest forms of penance and austerities to please and get a boon from Siva in order to save her husband. Fearing that she would in her turn make bad use of any gift bestowed on her, Siva hesitated to respond to Manōdari's prayers. At last, no longer able to hold himself out against her, Siva appeared

¹ The Bhagavati (goddess) of Cranganore is identified with Kannaki of the Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram*, a married virgin who came to be deified chiefly on account of her devotion to a rake of a husband. People considered her to be an avatar (incarnation) of Kāli. Bacchanalian orgies accompanied by obscene songs and gesticulations form an important part of her worship at Cranganore. The pilgrims do believe that their vulgarity is pleasing to the 'Virgin Mother.'

² The story of the fight between Kāli and the demon Dāruka is found in the South Indian version of the *Mārkanḍeya Purāṇa*.

unto her and presented her with a few drops of sweat from his body, with these words,—“Worry thyself not over thy husband; whenever thou art in need sprinkle a few drops of Our sweat on men, and they shall give thee the best of whatever they have.” Manōdari hurried homewards, but she was too late; on her way she met Kāli on her lion with her army of bhutas (goblins) returning triumphantly after killing her husband. Now was her chance for revenge; on his daughter herself she tried the magical potency of Siva's sacred sweat-drops; she squirted the whole of them on the goddess. All at once Kāli began to feel feverish, an excruciating pain seemed to rend her whole frame, scarlet papulae of smallpox appeared all over her body, and she fell off from her lion and lay on the earth writhing in agony. Siva heard of this sad plight of his daughter; in an instant out came from his ear a fierce goblin, to whom he said,—“My son, I name thee Ghaṇṭākarna. Go and save thy sister.” Reaching the spot where Kāli lay prostrate, he began easily to lick off the rashes on her; but, when he came to her face, she turned it away, saying,—“Let those rashes on my face remain there as a sort of ornament for me. You are my brother; it is not proper, therefore, that your face should come in contact with mine.” All the while, Manōdari was witnessing from a distance the wonderful operations of Ghaṇṭākarna. Kāli had her now brought to her, her limbs and ears were cut off, and her eyes blinded, and she was asked to remain with the goddess as her vassal. Her sweet old name was no longer suitable for her, so she came ever afterwards to be known as Vasūrimāla or “Pox-garland.” To her infernal but highly handicapped activities are ascribed the seasonal ravages of the epidemic in the Malabar country.³

The various precautions taken to ward off smallpox are all based on the details of this myth about Vasūrimāla. As the nose is the only functioning sense organ in her, people take all possible care not to excite her olfactory sense; frying or other-

³ The dispensation of smallpox and cholera is, in the Tamil districts of Madras, vested with the village-goddess Mariamman, a very minor godling; it is strange that Kāli in Malabar should have a function of Mariamman too tagged on to her.

wise seasoning with mustard etc. are carefully avoided in the neighbourhood of an infected house, lest the odour should attract *Vasūrimāla* to the spot it comes from.

Often, when she is in a temper or has been provoked, the Terrible Mother sets her crawling slave active. Through her oracles in numberless little shrines studding the country she proclaims to terror-stricken villagers that she has obtained from her 'good father' so many (stating the number) baskets of the 'seed' (meaning smallpox) to be sown in their midst. The villagers of course seek her protection, and pacify her with promises of offerings in plenty; handfuls of paddy from measures of it offered to the goddess are distributed among the worshippers, which they piously carry home and bury at their gates to warn off the crawling demoness. In the event of a death due to smallpox, the house is purified by the oracle of *Kāli* dancing there at the dead of night with the afflatus of the goddess on him and yelling out thrice in his stentorian voice the war-cry of the goddess to drive away any lingering spirits.

Madras Museum.

A. AIYAPPAN.

SCRAPS OF ENGLISH FOLKLORE, XX.

Cambridgeshire.

Couvade.—In a family known to me the kitchen-maid showed signs of having loved not wisely but too well. She was, however, in the pink of health, and went about her work like an amazon. The cook said,—“Well, I did notice the young man was looking very sadly. That’s always the way; when the woman’s well, the man’s ill.”

W. H. D. ROUSE.

Oxfordshire.

Lucky events.—An Oxfordshire girl now living in London, says that it is lucky to have a bird to enter the house, especially if it alights on the curtain. If you see a piebald horse, you should cross your fingers till you see a dog, and then you will have some luck.

E. WRIGHT.